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THE TOTALITARIAN CLAIM OF THE GOSPELS

DORA WILLSON

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PENDLE HILL ESSAYS NUMBER FOUR

PENDLE HILL

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THE TOTALITARIAN CLAIM OF THE GOSPELS

The teaching of Jesus, as recorded in the first three Gospels, is intensely practical in that it offers a way to life which is open to experiment. But a tragic gap separates the un-religious, pseudo-scientific men and women of today from his message in its incomparable simplicity and clarity. Whenever the teaching is made intelligible, as it was for the hearers of Jesus and as it has been for many all through the ages, its appeal is immediate. For this direct approach we must clear our minds of preconceptions concerning Jesus, avoiding reference to the interpretations of writers about him, to the teachings of other great religious leaders, and to the findings of modern psychology, which in so many instances bear out his deep insights. Concentrating our attention on that which is of primary importance for living, let us try to restate the teaching of Jesus in language as comprehensible to us as it was to the ordinary, half-educated, fear-ridden man to whom he spoke.

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JESUS' SINGLENESS OF AIM

Anyone who has the privilege of coming to the Gospels with a mind undulled by familiarity is impressed at once with the singleness of aim shown by Jesus. That this characteristic should emerge as sharply as it does, in spite of the inevitable distortion of the records, is an added testimony to its power. The brief period of Jesus' public activity was lived entirely under the compulsion of one single motive — to make clear to men the way to full abundant life which he had found. With an equally single loyalty, he held to the method he had chosen to reach his objective. This method was teaching. He lived as an itinerant teacher and he centered his teaching on that which was for him essential: the process, the means by which men might attain fullness of life. Nowhere in these Gospels do we find any extensive descriptions of objectives, results, ends. Often Jesus gives examples of how that person will function in daily life who has found and followed the Way.[1] But there is little trace of that which is frequent in the writings of many mystics: vivid accounts of states of bliss beyond the

AND OF METHOD

[1] Matthew 5:21 — 6:18. Luke 10:30-37. English Revised Version.

reach of human understanding. Such terms as "life", "kingdom of God",[1] are used by Jesus to describe the wholly satisfactory results of the right process — these are vague, general terms to which anyone, from the most highly developed to the simplest, can give content. In the same way, and with the same uncompromising absolutism, Jesus speaks of the results of the wrong process as "destruction".[2]

This absolutism of Jesus, so evidently an integral part of his personality and so clearly expressed in his course of action, is reflected in his teaching on the Way to life. Or perhaps it would be more exact to say that the Way which led him to life is of such a nature that those who follow it become absolutists.

JESUS' CLEAR UNDERSTANDING OF THE WAY

However that may be, the clarity of his own understanding of that which lay behind his own attainment of life must have been exceptional. Nothing is more difficult to state lucidly than the steps, often half or wholly unconscious, which lead to spiritual results. What a magnificent command of thought and language Jesus must have had may be guessed from those fragments of his

[1] Matthew 7:14, 21.
[2] Matthew 7:13.

teaching which are still available to us, often corrupted through misunderstanding and repetition, but still in a number of cases marked with the sign of genius. We need but compare some of the sayings of Jesus as they are found in the Gospels with paraphrases of those sayings down through the ages to sense the difference in tone.[1]

FINDING THE WAY AND COUNTING THE COST

One of the significant aspects of Jesus' attitude is his realism. He has a faith in the possibilities of man that is reckless, measured by our usual standards, but at the same time he knows that few be they that find the narrow gate leading to life. Far from making light of the difficulties and giving his hearers optimistic encouragement, he actually warns them to sit down and count the cost before it is too late. In a pair of parables as remarkable for penetration of thought as for perfection of form,[2] Jesus recommends the reasonable approach, reasonable if life is something more than a haphazard, day-by-day adventure. Lay your plans, he advises,

[1] See for instance: Thomas à Kempis: *Imitation of Christ*, Book I, Chaps. XIV, XXIII, etc. See also modern lives of Jesus, such as J. Middleton Murry: *Jesus, Man of Genius*, and Albert Schweitzer: *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God*.

[2] Luke 14:28-32.

weigh pros and cons, evaluate the requirements on the one hand, your resources on the other. If few religious teachers speak in this way to their followers, it may be because the claim made is usually confused: the individual cannot see clearly what is required of him, let alone measure himself against those requirements. And so, swung by emotion, he may start what he cannot finish, and "all that behold begin to mock"—a sharp, one-sentence portrayal of only too much of our religious living. And in the parallel story, the king who with ten thousand men has to meet an army of double the size will send "an ambassage for peace", if he considers the situation objectively, rather than rush into disastrous conflict. Such realism and reasonableness are in so direct a contrast with much of what is popularly considered to be the proper religious attitude of fervent commitment, that we may easily fail to see its meaning. For all his sense of urgency, which his extraordinary concentration of purpose and activity denotes, Jesus has an equally strong sense of timelessness. Revivalistic appeals, rushing men into decisions, are no fit prelude for the enterprise of gaining life. There may be a place for the profound stirring of the emotions, but after

that one should take time out and assume full responsibility in coolness of spirit for the decisive steps.

JESUS' TEACHING OF THE WAY

It is here, one would like to suggest, that Jesus makes his most significant contribution to the world, and it is here too that he is most absolute in his claim on the individual—in answering that fundamental question: What shall I do to be saved? It would seem as though Jesus considered this the question most worthy of answer. We find teaching on the Way scattered throughout the Gospels, evidence that time and again he must have returned to it, using different wording, parables, analogies, varied figures of speech, in his eagerness to make men understand.

THE WAY OPEN TO ALL

Is the process so complicated then, so hard to comprehend? That would not seem to have been Jesus' view: on the contrary, it appeared to him as a Way open to anyone. Of all the prerequisites usually set forth by religious teachers, Jesus assumes one only: moral earnestness, a deep desire for life. That slender foothold is all that man needs, it would seem, to start on the Way. No preliminary be-

liefs in anything or anyone, beyond that general innate belief in life and in the validity of wanting it for one's self. No intellectual grasp of the nature of God, man or the universe. No conviction of personal sin to be washed clean by the self-sacrifice of another. A singular simplicity of conception. None should draw back, saying he lacks intellectual ability or spiritual insight. "Ho, everyone that thirsteth . . ."[1] The basic need for life, giving to that term the utmost content, justifies us in believing that the Way, as understood by Jesus, is open to all.

BUT IT IS A NARROW GATE

But it is clear that this does not imply an easy process. Elsewhere Jesus speaks of the narrow gate and the straitened way which few find.[2] If on the one hand no special qualifications of mind or spirit are indispensable, and yet on the other, few are those who find the Way, it must be because something is required other than reasoning or spiritual exercises, something apparently more arduous, more exacting. As Jesus makes abundantly clear, what is required is action, action of such a fundamental nature that one

THE WAY IS ACTION

[1] Isaiah 55:1.
[2] Matthew 7:14.

might call it *the* action, the supreme and decisive act by which man gains a new life, enters into a new world. No wonder the image of birth imposes itself: as truly creative as the act that brings forth a living child into the physical world is that act whereby man emerges into fullness of life.

THOSE WHO FOLLOW THE WAY ARE BRETHREN OF JESUS

One of the first things to be noticed in Jesus' teaching about the Way is that others, by following it, become his brethren. "Whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother."[1] The results which he had attained are attainable by others. It is suggestive to consider the implications of this as to the method Jesus himself had followed. This necessary and decisive step had been taken by him. It is out of his own experience that he describes it. Not only that, but when we see him stating so positive a conviction as to the results of this method and observe in him those very results in challenging intensity, we

JESUS' KNOWLEDGE OF THE WAY AND HIS TEACHING OF IT

[1] Mark 3:35.

realize, as his hearers did, that he speaks with an authority different from that of the scribes. It is authority that rests within, in that which he has lived. It is the kind of authority which we respect, comparable to that of the genuine scientist who has carefully followed the specifications for his experiments and whose statements are based on facts he has himself established. Jesus affirms again and again that the results are confidently to be expected: one becomes his brother or sister;[1] one enters the kingdom;[2] the merchant obtains the pearl of great price;[3] life is saved.[4] This quietly triumphant conviction is unmistakable. Unmistakable too are the results seen in Jesus: the objectivity with which he regards himself,[5] the receptive attitude toward all who come to him,[6] even, it would seem, toward inquirers from the groups most likely to be hostile to him,[7] the Pharisees and the scribes; and above all the utter freedom with which he moves

JESUS' ASSURANCE AS TO RESULTS

[1] Mark 3:35.
[2] Matthew 7:21.
[3] Matthew 13:46.
[4] Luke 17:33.
[5] Matthew 12:32.
[6] For instance: Mark 10:13-16. Luke 7:1-10.
[7] For instance: Mark 2:18-28. Luke 10:25-28.

through life and meets success and apparent disaster. This freedom is rooted in a deep sense of security. "Be not afraid of them which kill the body,"[1] he said to his friends. He was not afraid: nor had he cause to fear "him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell."[1] His was the supremely strengthening experience of knowing himself to be well-pleasing to God. The relationship he had achieved with God convinced him of a sustaining and ever watchful love which banished fear. We who want to understand the Gospels' totalitarian claim should give its full value to this assurance of Jesus as to the positive nature of the general outcome, even though he remains consistently vague as to specific, individual results. The Way may be such that few find it, but when seen clearly and followed, it leads infallibly to life. Jesus may have hoped that more would find it if it were described in terms both practical and precise. He used all his superb gifts of insight and expression to tell men what this decisive act is. Two things he makes clear: (1) it involves the whole personality; (2) it is directed toward the Totality which he calls God.[2]

[1] Luke 12:4,5.
[2] Luke 10:27.

THE WAY IS TOTALITARIAN

Unlike the scientist who, in carrying out his experiments, always reserves those areas of his self that do not lie within their scope, the man who enters upon this vital experiment must throw in his whole self. This would seem to be the one essential condition for success. Jesus states it in a number of different ways: The parables of the treasure and of the pearl[1] show us men who are obliged to give all they have in exchange for that one thing which they want. The rich ruler who has obeyed the ethical code of his day in its entirety, but without feeling that he has gained "eternal life", has made one reservation; when this is pointed out to him, he is unwilling to give it up and goes away sorrowful.[2] The lawyer knows the way to "eternal life." He quotes a formulation from his own Scriptures which Jesus accepts as adequate, adding only that it must be put into effect. It is a statement of a double relationship, the first between man and God, the second between man and man, and the first is of such a nature that man's whole self is absorbed in it.[3] And in that pregnant saying which has been called the most

[1] Matthew 13:44-46.
[2] Mark 10:17-27.
[3] Luke 14:27.

profound that has ever passed the lips of man, "Whosoever shall seek to gain his life shall lose it: but whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it", Jesus states the Way in terms of absolute loss of self.

DIFFICULTY OF UNDERSTANDING WHAT THE INDIVIDUAL HAS TO DO

Sayings such as these, while they make obvious the supreme costliness of the experiment, do not yield their full meaning at a glance. It would be strange if they did. But it is not abstract reasoning that is needed to understand them. Rather it is that intense scrutiny, made urgent by deep personal concern, which any man who is in earnest about his life will give to possible methods of attaining its fulfillment. Everything would seem to turn upon the meaning of that which has to be given by the individual. What is this "all"? Where lie the boundaries of the self? Does one ever reach the point where one

CLEAR STATEMENT OF THE WAY

may say: Nothing is now held back? On the possibility of giving an intelligible answer to such questions as these may depend the whole future

[1] Luke 17:33.

of man. Wrong, inadequate interpretations may mean stagnation and atrophy. Clear, practical interpretations may mean growth beyond our present biological stage of development. And this is the very place where confused thinking is most prevalent. The Way is stated in terms of ethical conduct, as if one could attain goodness bit by bit and thus reach life. In other words, results are taken for causes: the visible manifestations of the process are thought to be the process itself and men try to reach the goal by forcing themselves to a mechanical repetition of what can only be spontaneous fruits. Nothing is more baffling than such misconceptions, nor more completely calculated to discourage the earnest seeker. Jesus is too clear-minded ever to talk of perfectionism of conduct as the Way. We may consider that he is a perfectionist, but in an utterly different field. As long as we are concerned with good conduct, we are enmeshed in the specific, in details, in parts and fragments of ourselves.

THE WAY WRONGLY STATED IN TERMS OF OUTCOMES

TOTALITY OF THE INDIVIDUAL IS NOT REACHED PIECEMEAL

But the crux of the matter, as we saw, is that the totality of the individual has to be committed to this experiment. Can we get the totality by listing the parts, begining for instance with the more obvious external possessions, and passing to one's affections, desires, ambitions, and so on? The piecemeal process is apparently endless. Jesus evidently meant something else, for his descriptions are always of processes that come to completion, that are followed by the desired outcomes.[1] Is there then some other way of encompassing the personality? Instead of working inward from the periphery, so to speak, is it possible to make a direct drive for that which may be central? Is there a point beyond which there would be no need to go, for having reached it one is at the very core of being and if that be handed over, the whole self, good and bad, is also handed over? Is that the point within one's self where decisions are made?

[1] See notes 1-4, page 11.

THE SELF IS ENCOMPASSED WHEN SELF-WILL IS ABANDONED

If one could envisage the complete abandonment of one's self to another human being, that would be the ultimate surrender, would it not, the surrender of one's own power of choice, of one's own will. *You* choose, *you* decide between right and wrong. *I* do what *you* decide. We feel instinctively how utterly wrong it would be if this agreement were entered into between human beings. To no individual, however trustworthy, should we guarantee this ultimate allegiance. It is equally tragic for any institution to make any such claims upon men, as we see at once if we use the simple criterion of Jesus, "By their fruits ye shall know them",[1] and trace through history the often appalling results of such attempts. No, Jesus makes it very clear, man can safely hand over his self-direction only to that which is absolute, all-inclusive, without limit.

SURRENDER TO THE TOTALITY

Jesus uses the word God. Not the specific good recognized as such, nor the totality of those ideals by which mankind tries to guide its con-

[1] Matthew 7:16.

duct and which all too often cripple rather than help, not a code of ethics, however venerable, not even the so-called Golden Rule. These are all partial interpretations, caught in the net of space and time, subject to change with our changing conditions. Only the Totality, beyond the farthest reach of our knowing and of our imagining, is a sufficient object for the total devotion that is required.

THE TOTALITY HAS INGRESS INTO THE SELF

But can an act of submission to the infinite and limitless be anything more than a phrase? Practical content is seen as we realize that in every individual there is a point where the Totality touches the self and the self is enabled to transcend its own limits. Many and beautiful are the expressions men have used to try to describe this: they have called this point of fusion the light which lighteth every man,[1] the seed, that of God within.[2] If these seem too poetic, let us simply look steadfastly within our self at that ineradicable sense of right and wrong which is in every man; in the plainest of language, which is as inadequate as the most elaborate: where we may look,

[1] John 1:9.
[2] George Fox, William Penn, etc.

AT THAT POINT THE WAY STARTS

where we *must* look to make a start is at that point where we decide our conduct. When that sense is blunted by deliberate misuse, the unforgiveable sin against the Holy Spirit is committed,[1] as Jesus declares in one of his most categorical sayings, the sin from which, in the very nature of the case, there is no redress. On the other hand, contact is at once established with the Whole when man takes as sincere a decision as he knows how to make, to be loyal to the directions which come to him, however imperfectly, through this principle of discrimination.

RESULTS FOLLOW FROM EVEN A MODEST BEGINNING

Even when the decision is taken at a very humble level, without reference to religious beliefs, the radical act of abdication to the unspecified good bears fruit. Though repeated failures of realization follow immediately, the self has been born into a new life of freedom and potency, and persistent renewal of the pledge brings increase of strength. There may never be ecstasies or visions, there may never be even the sense of Presence, but Jesus

[1] Matthew 12:32.

seems to take for granted that there will be heightened moral sensitivity and power and sureness in living unknown to those who simply strive to lead good lives. No infallible assurance as to what is the right in every specific occasion is promised: indeed Jesus himself was uncertain as to the content of the will of God for him at the very eve of his death, and the account of Gethsemane shows how in the severest crisis that will is sought — by holding the self in absolute availability. In fact, it would seem rather as if life presents dilemmas of increasing difficulty as fineness of discrimination grows. But one thing is gained: when the right is seen, there need be no struggle to force oneself to do it. Not that perfect action will inevitably result. Jesus does not seem to consider perfectionism of action as part of the indispensable condition for entrance into life. Failure we know we must expect here. The indispensable condition is that, in spite of failure, we renew the initial commitment: all of my self to the Whole — known, unknown, unknowable; full control to

PERFECTION IN DAILY LIVING NOT TO BE EXPECTED. PERFECTION IN REPEATED COMMITMENT IS THE WAY

that which is mediated to me through the indwelling sense of right, cost what it may; walls pulled down, unimpeded ingress offered to God. The regnancy of God, the kingdom of God: that is what Jesus called the result of that act; my self-direction unreservedly handed over, my personal self transcended, a new self released into power and life.

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